

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA

CHRISTINE ELIZABETH HARTLE,)
Plaintiff,)
-vs-) Civil Action No. 15-1034
CAROLYN W. COLVIN,)
COMMISSIONER OF SOCIAL SECURITY,)
Defendant.)

AMBROSE, Senior District Judge

OPINION

Pending before the court are Cross-Motions for Summary Judgment. (ECF Nos. 11 and 13). Both parties have filed Briefs in Support of their Motions. (ECF Nos. 12 and 14). After careful consideration of the submissions of the parties, and based on my Opinion set forth below, I am denying Plaintiff's Motion for Summary Judgment (ECF No. 11) and granting Defendant's Motion for Summary Judgment. (ECF No. 13).

I. BACKGROUND

Plaintiff brought this action for review of the final decision of the Commissioner of Social Security ("Commissioner") denying her application for supplemental security income ("SSI") pursuant to the Social Security Act ("Act"). Plaintiff filed her application alleging she had been disabled since August 22, 2009. (ECF No. 9-5, p. 2). Administrative Law Judge ("ALJ"), Wayne Stanley, held a hearing on March 26, 2015. (ECF No. 9-3, pp. 24-74). On April 6, 2015, the ALJ found that Plaintiff was not disabled under the Act. (ECF No. 9-2, pp. 12-20).

After exhausting all administrative remedies, Plaintiff filed the instant action with this court. The parties have filed Cross-Motions for Summary Judgment. (Docket Nos. 11 and 13). The issues are now ripe for review.

II. LEGAL ANALYSIS

A. Standard of Review

The standard of review in social security cases is whether substantial evidence exists in the record to support the Commissioner's decision. *Allen v. Bowen*, 881 F.2d 37, 39 (3d Cir. 1989). Substantial evidence has been defined as "more than a mere scintilla. It means such relevant evidence as a reasonable mind might accept as adequate." *Ventura v. Shalala*, 55 F.3d 900, 901 (3d Cir. 1995), quoting *Richardson v. Perales*, 402 U.S. 389, 401 (1971). Additionally, the Commissioner's findings of fact, if supported by substantial evidence, are conclusive. 42 U.S.C. §405(g); *Dobrowolsky v. Califano*, 606 F.2d 403, 406 (3d Cir. 1979). A district court cannot conduct a *de novo* review of the Commissioner's decision or re-weigh the evidence of record. *Palmer v. Apfel*, 995 F.Supp. 549, 552 (E.D. Pa. 1998). Where the ALJ's findings of fact are supported by substantial evidence, a court is bound by those findings, even if the court would have decided the factual inquiry differently. *Hartranft v. Apfel*, 181 F.3d 358, 360 (3d Cir. 1999). To determine whether a finding is supported by substantial evidence, however, the district court must review the record as a whole. See, 5 U.S.C. §706.

To be eligible for social security benefits, the plaintiff must demonstrate that he cannot engage in substantial gainful activity because of a medically determinable physical or mental impairment which can be expected to result in death or which has lasted or can be expected to last for a continuous period of at least 12 months. 42 U.S.C. §423(d)(1)(A); *Brewster v. Heckler*, 786 F.2d 581, 583 (3d Cir. 1986).

The Commissioner has provided the ALJ with a five-step sequential analysis to use when evaluating the disabled status of each claimant. 20 C.F.R. §404.1520(a). The ALJ must determine: (1) whether the claimant is currently engaged in substantial gainful activity; (2) if not, whether the claimant has a severe impairment; (3) if the claimant has a severe impairment, whether it meets or equals the criteria listed in 20 C.F.R., pt. 404, subpt. P., appx. 1; (4) if the impairment does not satisfy one of the impairment listings, whether the claimant's impairments

prevent him from performing his past relevant work; and (5) if the claimant is incapable of performing his past relevant work, whether he can perform any other work which exists in the national economy, in light of his age, education, work experience and residual functional capacity. 20 C.F.R. §404.1520. The claimant carries the initial burden of demonstrating by medical evidence that he is unable to return to his previous employment (steps 1-4). *Dobrowolsky*, 606 F.2d at 406. Once the claimant meets this burden, the burden of proof shifts to the Commissioner to show that the claimant can engage in alternative substantial gainful activity (step 5). *Id.*

A district court, after reviewing the entire record may affirm, modify, or reverse the decision with or without remand to the Commissioner for rehearing. *Podedworny v. Harris*, 745 F.2d 210, 221 (3d Cir. 1984).

B. Subjective Complaints of Pain

Plaintiff argues that the ALJ erred in evaluating Plaintiff's subjective complaints of pain. (ECF No. 12, pp. 8-10). In evaluating whether a plaintiff's statements are credible, the ALJ will consider evidence from treating, examining and consulting physicians, observations from agency employees, and other factors such as the claimant's daily activities, descriptions of the pain, precipitating and aggravating factors, type, dosage, effectiveness, and side effects of medications, treatment other than medication, and other measures used to relieve the pain. 20 C.F.R. §§416.929(c), 404.1529(c); SSR 96-7p. The ALJ will also look at inconsistencies between the claimant's statements and the evidence presented. *Id.* I must defer to the ALJ's credibility determinations, unless they are not supported by substantial evidence. *Smith v. Califano*, 637 F.2d 968, 972 (3d Cir. 1981); *Baerga v. Richardson*, 500 F.2d 309, 312 (3d Cir. 1974), cert. denied, 420 U.S. 931 (1975).

In this case, Plaintiff specifically asserts that the ALJ "has simply disregarded [her] testimony in his findings and has really not addressed it as a topic for discussion when the Rules and Regulations and the Case Law provide that the pain must be considered." (ECF No.

12, p. 9). Contrary to Plaintiff's position, the ALJ did not ignore her agoraphobia, that she is taking medications or that she testified that she has pain in her lower back. Rather, he specifically addressed these issues. (ECF No. 9-2, pp. 14-19). After a review of the record, I find that the ALJ followed the proper method to determine the Plaintiff's credibility. As laid out in his decision, the ALJ considered the factors set forth above. (ECF No. 9-2, pp. 14-19). For example, while assessing Plaintiff's credibility, the ALJ compared the medical evidence to her complaints and found them to be contradictory. *Id.* The ALJ also discussed the fact that Plaintiff's complaints were contradicted by her daily activities and other evidence of record. *Id.* Thus, I find the ALJ properly evaluated Plaintiff's credibility as required by 20 C.F.R. §416.929 and SSR 96-7p and, based on the entire record as a whole, I find there is substantial evidence to support the ALJ's decision to find Plaintiff not entirely credible. (ECF No. 9-2, pp. 12-20). Therefore, I find no error in this regard.

An appropriate order shall follow.

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AMBROSE, Senior District Judge

ORDER OF COURT

THEREFORE, this 5th day of July, 2016, it is ordered that Plaintiff's Motion for Summary Judgment (Docket No. 11) is denied and Defendant's Motion for Summary Judgment (Docket No. 13) is granted.

BY THE COURT:

s/ Donetta W. Ambrose
Donetta W. Ambrose
United States Senior District Judge